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Abstract

In the fall of 1964, USS Skipjack (SSN 585) participated in anti-submarine warfare (ASW) exercises in the Atlantic Ocean. Skipjack's engineer, Lt. Alfred "Fred" McLaren, was in good spirits, both because the ASW exercises afforded a chance to demonstrate the capabilities of one of the U.S. Navy's most modern submarines, and because the boat's supply officer had acquired an unusually sumptuous array of steaks for evening meals. McLaren was displeased, then, when Skipjack's executive officer placed him on the evening watch. Disappointed at consistently missing out on his favorite food, the young naval officer soon devised an ingenious workaround. He would ask one of his fellow officers to provide a quick head break, during which time he would make his way to the wardroom pantry and take a big bite out of the juiciest steak he could find. Putting the rest of the steak into the fridge, McLaren would find it waiting there for him when he got off watch. For a while, this stratagem worked splendidly, until one night he opened the fridge and found nothing but teeth marks rimmed by a thin border of meat. McLaren could do little but laugh and admit that he had been foiled.

Disciplines

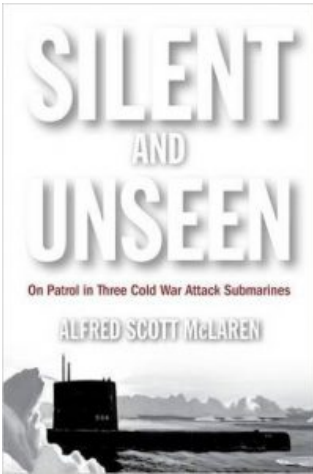
Military History

Comments

This is a book review published as Timothy S. Wolters, review essay of "Silent and Unseen: On Patrol in Three Cold War Attack Submarines," by Alfred McLaren, Naval Historical Foundation Book Reviews, vol. 59, 14 December 2016, 3 pp. Posted with permission.

BOOK REVIEW – *Silent and Unseen: On Patrol in Three Cold War Attack Submarines*

Posted on [December 14, 2016](#) by [Admin](#)



By Alfred S. McLaren, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, MD (2015)

Reviewed by Timothy S. Wolters, Ph.D.

In the fall of 1964, USS *Skipjack* (SSN 585) participated in anti-submarine warfare (ASW) exercises in the Atlantic Ocean. *Skipjack*'s engineer, Lt. Alfred "Fred" McLaren, was in good spirits, both because the ASW exercises afforded a chance to demonstrate the capabilities of one of the U.S. Navy's most modern submarines, and because the boat's supply officer had acquired an unusually sumptuous array of steaks for evening meals. McLaren was displeased, then, when *Skipjack*'s executive officer placed him on the evening watch. Disappointed at consistently missing out on his favorite food, the young naval officer soon

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Amusing anecdotes like this one fill Capt. Alfred S. McLaren's fascinating memoir of seven years as a junior officer aboard three operational U.S. Navy submarines during the height of the Cold War. *Silent and Unseen* is more than an entertaining series of sea stories; it also offers a candid reflection on leadership and a remarkable glimpse into Cold War submarine life and operations.

For readers interested in the small but slowly growing body of literature on Cold War submarining, McLaren's name will be familiar. He is also the author of *Unknown Waters* (University of Alabama Press, 2008), a firsthand account of a Siberian continental shelf survey conducted by USS *Queenfish* (SSN 651) in the summer of 1970. During that mission, commanded by McLaren, *Queenfish* navigated under bummocks, over irregular sea floors, and through ice canyons to collect valuable bathymetric data in the Laptev, East Siberian, and Chukchi seas. McLaren stressed his success in leading that expedition derived from what he had learned on earlier missions and from previous commanding officers, but he devoted only a few paragraphs to those experiences. *Silent and Unseen* addresses this lacuna, serving as an illuminating prequel to *Unknown Waters*.

McLaren organizes *Silent and Unseen* into three roughly equal parts, one each for the boats he served on from January 1958 to April 1965. The first of these, USS *Greenfish* (SS 351), was a *Balao*-class diesel-electric submarine that had undergone a GUPPY conversion after World War II. McLaren served as a division officer, participated in two intelligence-gathering missions in the Northern Pacific, and qualified in submarines. Even before he had earned his dolphins, though, McLaren was unexpectedly summoned to Washington for an

interview with Vice Admiral Hyman G. Rickover. The legendary engineer accepted the young officer into his burgeoning nuclear power program, and in July 1959 McLaren reported to Advanced Nuclear Power School in Groton, Connecticut. McLaren successfully completed his training the following summer at the Navy's S3G prototype reactor in upstate New York. Having survived Rickover's arduous program, he received orders to USS *Seadragon* (SSN 584).

Seadragon was the fourth and final ship of the *Skate*-class, and just the eighth nuclear submarine commissioned by the U.S. Navy. McLaren was thrilled, writing, "To say I was excited . . . is an understatement" (p. 67). He was enthralled as well by *Seadragon*'s upcoming mission, a transpolar voyage from Kittery, Maine, to a new homeport in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. During this transit *Seadragon* would accomplish some historic feats, becoming the first submarine to survey the underside of large icebergs, the first to visit Cornwallis Island, and the third to surface at the North Pole. The boat also discovered a deep-water passage between two islands in the Barrow Strait, invaluable information for any future submarine transiting the Northwest Passage.

With Cold War tensions running high, *Seadragon* and her crew soon found themselves on another mission clandestinely monitoring long-range ballistic missile tests by the Soviet Union. One wishes the author had written more about the mission, as well as two others *Seadragon* conducted during his time on board, but classification restrictions probably precluded this. McLaren does discuss *Seadragon*'s work developing passive sonar tactics and equipment for ASW, as well as the reason behind his decision to request a transfer in the spring of 1962. The Bureau of Naval Personnel obliged, and the submariner soon found himself headed back to Kittery, where he reported aboard USS *Skipjack*, then in overhaul, just weeks before U.S. intelligence noted an increase in Soviet military aid to Cuba.

Skipjack was the lead vessel of a new class of submarines and the first nuclear sub to have a teardrop hull. She was also the first ship powered by the famous S5W reactor plant, later used on *Thresher*- and *Sturgeon*-class SSNs and "Forty-one for Freedom" SSBNs. McLaren recounts how unfolding intelligence about events in Cuba prompted a frenzied effort to finish *Skipjack*'s overhaul, and by early October the boat had completed sea trials and arrived in Groton. Rather than deploy to the Caribbean, though, *Skipjack* departed for the Mediterranean with orders to protect allied forces from Soviet ships and submarines sailing out of the Black Sea. McLaren says that during the boat's Atlantic transit he and his shipmates expected to be diverted to Cuba at any moment. Regrettably, he fails to recount how they learned that the Cuban Missile Crisis had been resolved.

With international affairs slightly less pressing, McLaren and the rest of *Skipjack*'s crew turned their attention to liberty call. Some of the most humorous stories in the book involve events in various Mediterranean ports, including the time McLaren, as ship's duty officer, accidentally gave distinguished-visitor honors to an enlisted Italian sailor. *Skipjack* returned home in time for Christmas, but months later conducted a surveillance patrol in the Barents Sea, one of two such missions during McLaren's tour. When not on deployment, *Skipjack* played an important role in Submarine Development Group Two's "Big Daddy" series of submarine ASW exercises.

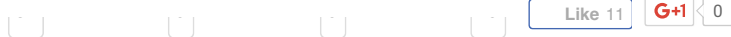
One of the strengths of *Silent and Unseen* is McLaren's unvarnished analysis of the six commanding officers under which he served while on board *Greenfish*, *Seadragon*, and *Skipjack*. The author says that he learned

something from each of them, but the one he holds in highest regard is George P. Steele, *Seadragon's* inaugural commanding officer. According to McLaren, Steele was “so brave and charismatic a leader at sea that his crew would have gone to the ends of the earth for him” (p. 3). Conversely, the author does not shy away from criticizing Steele’s successor, Charles “Dan” Summitt, whom he found timid and uninspiring. McLaren argues that Summitt’s lack of leadership and tactical acumen greatly hindered mission effectiveness and almost resulted in disaster during one ASW exercise. One may surmise that McLaren’s willingness to criticize Summitt stems from the latter’s memoir, *Tales of a Cold War Submariner* (Texas A&M University Press, 2004), in which Summitt claims to have been so aggressive on one mission that a Soviet destroyer dropped a depth charge on *Seadragon* (Summitt, p. 118). McLaren seems to want to set the record straight as he sees it.

As with all memoirs, the sands of time introduce a few minor errors into the narrative, such as when the author demotes Rickover to the rank of rear admiral during his nuclear power interview (p. 57), or when he accidentally places the loss of *Thresher* in the wrong year (p. 224). Small errors like these in no way diminish McLaren’s contribution, which is substantial. Without a doubt he has written one of the best available memoirs by a Cold War submariner, a tale that is engaging, insightful, and thought-provoking. In his epilogue, McLaren says that he plans to publish a third book that will cover the years following his detachment from *Skipjack*, during which time he completed brief tours on USS *Whale* (SSN 638) and USS *Greenling* (SSN 614) before serving first as executive officer, then as commanding officer, of *Queenfish*. One would be surprised if the last volume in McLaren’s Cold War submarine trilogy turns out to be any less captivating than the first two.



Captain Wolters is a submariner attached to the Naval History and Heritage Command’s reserve detachment. He is an associate professor of history at Iowa State University and author of Information at Sea: Shipboard Command and Control in the U.S. Navy, from Mobile Bay to Okinawa (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).



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